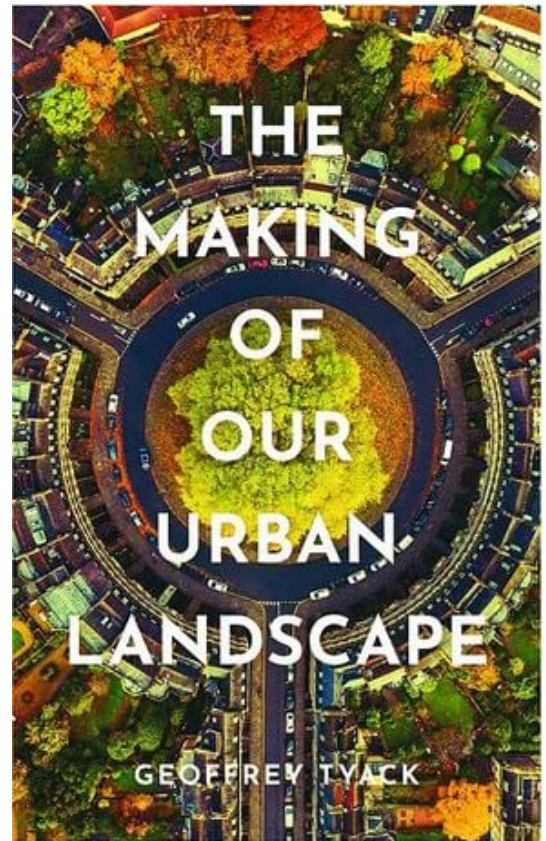


Monuments and monstrosities: Humane planning has again succumbed to wholesale obliteration

by James Stevens Curl

The most startling achievement of the Victorian period was Britain's urbanisation. By the 1850s the numbers living in rural parts were fractionally down on those in urban areas. By the end of Victoria's reign more than 75 per cent of the population were town-dwellers, and a romantic nostalgic longing for a lost rural paradise was fostered by those who denigrated urbanisation. This myth of a lost rural ideal led to phenomena such as garden cities and suburbia. Anti-urbanists and critics of the era detested the one thing that gave the Victorian city its great qualities: they were frightened of and hated the Sublime.



The Making of Our Urban Landscape, Geoffrey Tyack (Oxford University Press, £25)

These two books deal with the urban landscape in different ways. Tyack provides a chronological narrative of the history of some British towns and cities spread over two millennia from Roman times to the present day, so his is a very ambitious work. Most towns of modern Britain already existed in some form by 1300, he rightly states, though a few were abandoned, such as Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester) in Hampshire, a haunted place of great and poignant beauty with impressive remains still visible. Most Roman towns were more successful, surviving and developing through the centuries, none more so than London. Tyack describes several in broad, perhaps too broad, terms.

He outlines the creation of dignified civic buildings from the 1830s onwards, reflecting the evolution of local government as power shifted to the growing professional, manufacturing and

middle classes: fine town halls, art galleries, museums, libraries, concert halls, educational buildings and the like proliferated, many of supreme architectural importance. Yet the civic public realm has been under almost continuous attack from central government and the often corrupt forces of privatisation for the last half century.

Tyack is far too lenient when considering the unholy alliances between legalised theft masquerading as “comprehensive redevelopment”, local and national government, architects, planners and large construction firms with plentiful supplies of bulging brown envelopes. Perfectly decent buildings, which could have been rehabilitated and updated, were torn down, and whole communities were forcibly uprooted in what was the greatest assault in history on the urban fabric of Britain and the obliteration of the nation’s history and culture.



Victoria Law Courts by Aston Webb & Ingress Bell, Birmingham,

1887-91

One of the worst professional crimes ever inflicted on humanity was the application of utopian modernism to the public housing-stock of Britain from the 1950s onwards: this dehumanised communities, spoiled landscapes and ruined lives, yet the architectural establishment remained in total denial. In 1968–72 the Hulme district of Manchester was flattened to make way for a modernist dystopia created by a team of devotees of Corbusianity.

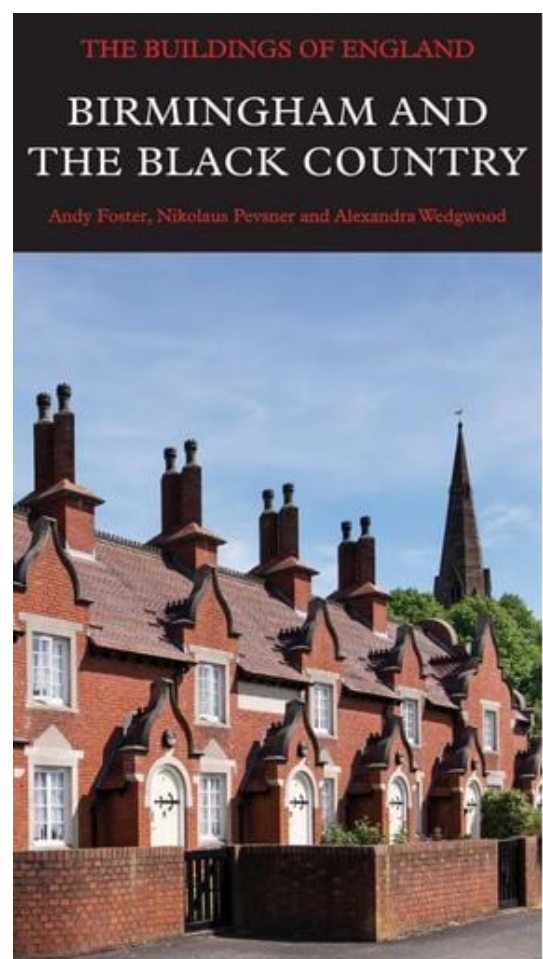
The huge quarter-mile long six-storey deck-access “Crescents” were shabbily named after architects of the Georgian, Regency and early-Victorian periods (Adam, Barry, Kent and Nash). This monstrous, hubristic imposition rapidly became one of the most notoriously dysfunctional housing estates in Europe, a spectacular failure whose problems were all-too-apparent from the very beginning. Yet in *The Buildings of England 1969*, Manchester was praised for “doing more perhaps than any other city in England ... in the field of council housing”. The “Crescents” were recognised quickly as unparalleled disasters and hated by the unfortunates forced to live there. They were demolished in the 1990s, but the creators of that hell were never punished.



Handsworth Cemetery Chapel, by W.H. Bidlake, 1909-10

Dan Smith (hailed as “planner of the year” by the Architectural Review), served three years in chokey for corruption, but not before doing immense damage to the magnificent architectural legacy of Newcastle upon Tyne. Smith

became associated with a creature of negligible architectural ability, John Poulson, who lavishly distributed bribes without regard to political ideology, and inflicted lasting damage on British towns, particularly in the north, where centres were wrecked in the name of supposed “improvement”. The creation of these architectural horrors lined the pockets of numerous corrupt politicians, civil servants and local-government officials. Tyack is altogether too kind to those unscrupulous, greedy personalities possessing dangerous self-confidence in theories and obstinate zeal in applying them.



Birmingham and The Black Country; Foster, Pevsner, and Wedgwood (Yale University Press, £45)

Reviews of Tyack’s book have praised it to the skies, but I have not seen any questioning of the very thin spread of information necessitated by the attempt to cover an enormous

geographical area and timescale, nor have I observed criticisms of the quality of the 144 images, 46 of which appear to have been taken by him, and should have been rejected because of the grotesquely converging verticals: there is really no excuse to illustrate a serious book with amateurish snapshots. All pictures have further suffered by being printed on an off-white paper instead of a glossy white, so are murky and indistinct. Nevertheless his is a brave attempt to encapsulate the idea of Britain's urban history within one modestly sized volume.

Birmingham and The Black Country, on the other hand, which includes parts of historic Staffordshire, Worcestershire and Warwickshire by embracing Wolverhampton, Dudley, Walsall, Sandwell and Solihull, as well as Birmingham and its suburbs, has magnificent colour photographs by James O. Davies, all highly professional and undistorted. The detail is admirable, although the ruination of self-confident Victorian Birmingham in the post-1945 period is still extremely painful to anyone not aesthetically completely desensitised.

The city's road system was largely the creation of Birmingham's City Engineer, H.J.B. Manzoni: like many other draconian interventions of the time, this destroyed a great deal of good stuff, leaving plenty of SLOAP (Space Left Over After Planning). Manzoni's view prevailed that there was little of real worth in Birmingham's architecture, so everything should be completely new and must contrast absolutely with everything that was there before.

That blinkered notion is once again being embraced, so there has been a precipitous decline in architectural quality, whilst the Future City Plan of 2021 re-echoes the crudest of 1960s urban interventions.



Engine Arm Aqueduct, by Thomas Telford, Sandwell, Smethwick, 1827-9

The book, therefore, is a superbly comprehensive and detailed record of the surviving built fabric of the area, marvellously illustrated and thoroughly researched. But it makes depressing reading, for those persons holding power in local government have learned nothing from the errors of their predecessors. "Redevelopment" has been a catalogue of disruption, destruction and loss. In Sandwell, for example, it has continued unabated, and in Walsall major historic buildings have "gone on fire", whilst road-focused wreckage wreaks havoc on the north side of the centre.

Reactions against destruction were fuelled by the scandal that saw J.Alan Maudsley (City Architect 1966–73) gaoled for corruption, and by a realisation that Manzoni-led development was not what it purported to be. But everything has changed

again (some Conservation Areas have been de-designated, which says a lot about official attitudes), and humane approaches to planning have succumbed to wholesale obliteration.

Birmingham and The Black Country, long in the making, is a timely and welcome publication.

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